



The Heaven Tree

Edith Pargeter

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England in the reign of King John - a time of beauty and squalor, of swift treachery and unswerving loyalty. Against this violent background, the story of Harry Talvace, master mason, unfolds.

The Heaven Tree Details

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Author : Edith Pargeter

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From Reader Review The Heaven Tree for online ebook

Spiced_wine says

Spoilers toward the end.

I read this first when I was about fifteen. My grandmother was reading it, knew I was writing, and suggested I read it for the language, and also because I was very interested in history.

I read the book at least a dozen times in my teen years, and fiercely desired to be able to write that kind of prose. I love rich characterizations, and though I have seen people complain that it starts too slowly, I find that beginning very important.

Is it now unfashionable to love words, to like to read authors who use words beautifully and descriptively? I don't know, but I am only concerned with what *I* enjoy as a reader, not with trends and fads. I still find this book has much to teach me. English is a beautiful language, and I want to read it used with depth, with lushness.

While Pargetter may romanticize her characters, her 12th century England is not so written. It is brutal for the villeins, and deeply unfair. She shows that the nobility had almost complete control over those under them, and very few people would interfere. That is a recurring theme in this book, and also crops up in her Cadfael series. (Tangentially, while Pargetter, writing as Ellis Peter's wrote lovely Cadfael novels, I think of those as her eveningtide books; there is far more passion apparent in The Heaven Tree trilogy).

As the story moves on, introducing Isambard (a wonderfully explored character, I think) we can see that there is going to be a clash of wills and self-destructive pride that will pull the roof down on every-one involved. But true tragedy of the ending, for me, is that genuine love that exists between Harry and Isambard. This was the first book I cried floods of tears over, and when a book touches me that deeply, it is very special. Re-reading it recently, I was pleased when I cried again. I felt as if I were not desensitized to beauty, because there is no gore, no horror, no great violence, no sex in this book (all of which I will read without a blink) just exceptional characters, and a grand and poignant story.

Julia Wherlock says

Oh my, I loved these books about a marcher castle called Parfois and the lord, builders and locals who inhabited that medieval world. Pargeter turned into Ellis Peters and did medieval who-done-its for Futura, until her death. Futura was my publisher at the time, but got swallowed up by Robert Maxwell's printing empire, to re-emerge as Little Brown.

Shane says

When I started this I was worried it was going to be more of a young adult novel, but fortunately the scope changed about one fifth of the way in. This really wasn't a story about ideas, it was all about the characters.

Usually that doesn't do it for me, but the medieval setting helped keep it interesting. There was a lot of tension in the first section and then a large part of the middle seemed to kind of lag because it was just pushing the story along. Then the last 3rd of the book went back to leaving you wondering if the characters you had grown to love were going to be okay or not. The ending was rather abrupt, but still pretty exciting.

This really seems like it would make a great movie.

While the first book is a story that stands alone well, I am definitely tempted to read the next two books in the series.

David Eppenstein says

This is the first book of a trilogy and I'm giving it 4.5 stars. The half star reduction from 5 is for some technical historic and plot flaws that may well be nitpicking on my part but, while minor, they did bother me. Nevertheless, the artistry of Edith Pargeter as demonstrated in this book is incredible.

The story is about Harry Talvace, the second son of a local English noble at the beginning of the 13th century. My initial historic problem or complaint is with Harry's noble birth and the manner in which his life is allowed to be lived. When we first meet Harry he is 15 years old and finishing an education he is given by his father to prepare for life as a clerk. He is also allowed to pursue this education in the company of a boyhood friend that is the son of the mason that is a villein of Harry's father. Harry's friend's name is Adam and in the course of teaching his trade to his son Adam's father also teaches Harry the mason's craft. All of this is contrary to everything I know about medieval nobility and their behavior and customs but on the whole this is a minor point as the arc of the story begins with these two boys.

Through a youthful misadventure these boys run afoul of medieval law with the consequences falling much more heavily on the lower born Adam than on the noble born Harry. Harry is appalled by the injustice of what the law requires and believes what is required is wrong. This leads to flight and the boys begin a life of exile as laboring masons. The story continues for 10 or more years with the boys returning to England under the patronage of a English lord that wishes Harry to build a church for him on his estate. I do not wish to reveal too much of this story and ruin its enjoyment for other readers but as this story continues two ladies are introduced and romantic elements are introduced into the story.

Now this is where this book grabbed me. The story itself is not very complicated or involved. Far from it. The story is pretty straight forward and doesn't really contain a lot of action as one might expect from a novel set in 13th century England. What the book does have is an intensity of emotion displayed in the characters the like of which I haven't encountered since reading Ayn Rand's "Fountainhead" and then her "Atlas Shrugged" decades ago. Rand's crazy philosophy aside she was an incredibly gifted writer and the relationships she created in those books were very powerful. After reading this book I think Edith Pargeter has created equally powerful relationships. The dynamics between the four primary characters is quite compelling even though the expressions of love contained in the book seem to spring from nowhere and have no basis in the plot which seems to challenge their credibility but who cares as the emotional tidal wave the author has created just sweeps the reader along. There are some pretty moving explosions of passion, good and bad, in this book that will keep the reader fully enthralled and turning pages. There are two more books to be read and I now look forward to continuing down the path the author has left for me.

Vickey Foggin says

This is historical fiction that makes the 12th century borderlands between Norman England and Celtic Wales come alive. The characterisations are amazing - the people in this story are real, and fascinating, and the women are just as interesting as the men. From villains to saints to background characters that have more craft in them than the main characters in other novels, the people make this book. I completely got lost in this world...what a great read! The author believed this trilogy was her greatest work...I believe her.

Kiwi Begs2Differ \ says

I loved the first book in this trilogy.

The historical setting is England in the 13th century, the background of Welsh unrest is familiar to me, having read *Here be Dragons* in 2017. There the POV was from the Welsh side and the story focused on Llewelyn, the rebel prince of Wales. It was good to see the situation from the other side of the conflict (from the English perspective), besides while Penman's book focuses on the nobility, Pargeter prefers shining light on the life of lower classes, merchants, artisans and villains.

In this first book, the protagonist is Harry Talvace, the second son of a minor Norman noble, turned stone mason who longs to build a splendid church as his masterpiece and legacy. There are obvious parallels with *The Pillars of the Earth* although I liked *The Heaven Tree* more as it is better researched, more historically rich in details and accuracy.

I'm not a big fan of romance, but there have been exceptions in the past and this book is one of them. Harry is a very likeable character, possessing many virtues, such as bravery, loyalty, honor, etc. properly abiding to the chivalry social code. The first book concludes with a tragedy, which is very fitting of this genre, Benedetta emerging as the epitome of the medieval heroine, I loved her!

I'm looking forward to continuing the series with the second book.

Highly recommended to historical fiction lovers and readers who enjoy "chansons de geste" and courtly romance type novels.

Christina says

Many parts of this book are perfect. I'm tempted to say the whole thing is perfect, but of course, that's not true about anything. But this book is lovely and true. The characters simply shine -- they are fully imagined and fully realized. The endings are perfectly anticipated in the beginnings without any force, manipulation, or predictability. Pargeter's use of language is dazzling. While I do love to read books more than once, it's rare that I read a section of a book and immediately turn the pages back to read it again, simply for the pleasure and beauty of the writing. That happened in this book. For reasons passing my understanding, people like *Pillars of the Earth*, which is about a medieval cathedral builder. This book is also about a medieval cathedral builder. Do not, do not, DO NOT read *Pillars of the Earth*. Do, do DO read *The Heaven Tree*.

Rebecca Jessup says

Edith Pargeter also wrote under the name Ellis Peters, and she was the author of the Cadfael mysteries. The Heaven Tree takes place in early 13th century England, France, and Wales. The author's deep knowledge of the early middle ages, plus her deft skill at developing both characters and plot, makes this a page-turner, an extremely engaging book. It's the sort of book that you'd like to read all in one sitting, but it's a little too dense to do that -- so you get to stay with it for days.

The lead character, Harry, is the son of a nobleman whose closest friend and blood-brother, Adam, is the son of a villein, a serf. Through no fault of theirs, the boys get into trouble and are accused of poaching another nobleman's deer. The penalty for Harry is flogging, but for his blood-brother the penalty is flogging and then losing his hand, which grossly unequal legality so horrifies Harry that he manages to steal two horses and run away with Adam before the full sentence can be carried out.

The entire book involves one exciting and credible adventure after another. Highly recommended. It's out of print, so you have to search for it. I found it both on Amazon and Powell's (powells.com)

Chrissie says

OH, this is the same author known as Ellis Peters, who wrote the Brother Cadfael series!!!

Gill says

June 2012

If I could give this book 6 stars I would. Anyone who writes should read Edith Pargeter, she draws her characters so clearly, that you really care what happens to them, and there were many parts of this book where I was choked with tears and emotion.

There was a TV programme about architecture where the presenter scaled the walls of castles, climbed into the turrets of churches and swung out on harness and wire over huge drops to examine details of decoration or stonework. This book excited and involved me about the early architect's plans and his skills as a stone mason, in a way that program did not.

Why did I wait so long to read this book I acquired several years ago? Well it is the first of a trilogy and I was waiting to get the other two books before embarking on it. However it stands alone and the next book concerns the son of the first central character, (just born when this book finished) so it is no barrier to my enjoyment of the book, and there is no tearing hurry to acquire the sequel.

I urge anyone who enjoys tales of the mediaeval world, a good story that carries you on reading far into the night, and strong characters, to read it!

June 2014

I have just reread this book. I wanted to pick up a book I really admire to see how the author constructs her narrative, how the plot is built, how the dialogue is given individual voices etc.. In other words I wanted to look at it objectively and work out her techniques. I failed miserably as from the first moment the story gripped me again and I just read from beginning to end over a couple of days. Working out how Pargeter weaves her magic is something I would love to do, but for which I seem to lack the discipline. It is a testament to her skill and craft that I am unable to analyse it coldly. I become instantly gripped by her story,

involved with her characters, and eager to read onwards swiftly. This is an amazing story, which also taught me much about history, architecture, and human nature.

Simon Stegall says

This book is kind of like The Fountainhead of medieval fantasy. It's about a cathedral builder in the 1200s. There are parts of this book that are very much worth 5 stars. But there are also some flaws that, sadly, cost the book as a whole two stars in my estimation.

First, the good stuff. The writing is beautiful. Pargeter was obviously someone very much moved by beauty, and she is able to transmit the longing that it inspires very well in her prose. The descriptions of the cathedral (the eponymous heaven tree) are some of the most gorgeous prose passages I've read this year. This is mostly where the 5-star passages come from.

Flaws: the main characters are perfect. They are SO perfect. They are the MOST beautiful, the MOST clever, the MOST spiritual, the MOST sexual, the MOST gifted individuals you will ever meet. I call this the Kvothe Syndrome. Many fantasy books die slow deaths because of this disease.

Fantasy authors tend, in my opinion, to indulge themselves, especially in the formation of main characters. They create characters that represent their ideal people-- characters they would like to fall in love with. If the reader also falls in love with that character, great. But if the reader DOESN'T, then they will be disgusted by the lavish praise the author heaps on their own character by making them SO DAMN BEAUTIFUL AND CLEVER. I got very tired of hearing Pargeter describe Harry Talvace's "flashing sea-green eyes." I get that you are head over heels for your own character. But stop. Even Rand (Rand!!) did better than that with Howard Roark. At least he was ugly.

By contrast, the villain in this book is way, WAY more interesting than the main characters, because he has desires that can never be satisfied, like a real person. He cannot leverage his genius against the world to achieve everything he ever wanted, like a real person. He is brokenhearted and betrayed. He's the best character.

Second flaw: there is too much historical context. I wanted more cathedral building. There is a solid 50 pages where we leave the building sight and dabble in English politics. Good in Penman. Not good in a book about cathedrals.

This book could have been great. Really, really, great. The premise of an artist struggling to create a masterpiece through adversity is great. And I actually really enjoyed large swaths of it. But these loose ends make me sad. They unravel the book for me.

Mom/sue says

Some books can be both harsh and sweet at the same time. Edith Pargeter has given us such a one in her twelfth century trilogy, The Heaven Tree which introduce us to cathedral builder, Harry Talvace. The complex purity of his character sends chills down my spine just thinking of him.

Deborah Pickstone says

I am on record as an Edith Pargeter fan. She, herself, considered this trilogy (of which this is the first book) to be the piece of writing that was truest to her intention and to the best she could achieve. I agree.

Her intention was to try to articulate the experience of someone not merely artistically talented but supremely gifted and the creation of a work of art that was outstanding of its kind. She opted for architecture and located it historically in an era of architectural challenge and development that enabled the place to be England and on the Welsh border, where she so often placed her action.

The characters are very characteristically Pargeter; she had little interest in the bad in people but focused by choice onto the good, the potential for positive. In Isambard we find a man tending to the 'bad' who could have been reformed by the love of a good woman had things not fallen out as they did. Harry does have his weaknesses (thankfully!) and contributes to the fraught situation. Eventually, the book ends in tragedy. To be continued.....

Colin says

I like the idea of medieval historical fiction, but apart from rare exceptions like *The Name of the Rose*, Barry Unsworth's *Miracle Play*, or Kevin Crossley-Holland's *Arthur* trilogy, so many of the books I've tried have failed to pull off that difficult trick of being readable to a modern audience while also sounding authentic. Patrick O'Brian is an absolute master of this with his *Aubrey* and *Maturin* series (although set long after the Middle Ages!).

Edith Pargeter in *The Heaven Tree* almost achieves the balance between verisimilitude and readability; it's a full-blooded tale of love, war and betrayal set in the troubled Welsh Marches at the beginning of the thirteenth century. There is plenty of action and incident and the plotting is spot on, although the telling of the tale sometimes feels laborious. It was published in 1960 and is very much of its time, a 'historical romance' with rather too much romance for my liking. But, that said, the author's knowledge of the period and the place is unsurpassed, and the world her characters inhabit feels very real. This is the first book in a trilogy and I'm not sure if I will go on to read the others - but I felt the same after reading the first of the *Aubrey/Maturin* series, and went on to read all twenty!

Eliska says

Zřejmě neumím číst historické, a navíc milostné romány. Takže i hodnocení je pro mne dost těžké. Tak jsem k tomu přistoupila takto: Jedna hvězda za příběh, spíše za posledních cca 50 stran, 2. za zasazení do historických reálií a tímto asi za popisy práce s kamenem a vytváření nádherného stavebního díla. Postava hlavního hrdiny Harryho, je naprosto nereálná, chová se tak, že se tomu nedá uvěřit (po devíti letech najednou zjistí, že se kdysi zamiloval do desetiletého děvčete a pak ji vroucně miluje, přestože ji celou dobu neviděl a vůbec nic o ní neví). Jeho vztah k matce a vlastní rodině je taky velmi zvláštní, a vůbec jeho chování a hluboké sociální smýšlení, kdy si myslí, že může změnit daná zákonná a tradiční pravidla své doby, přisobí neuvěřitelně až nesmyslně. Velice zvláštní na mě přisobilo i to, že je v knize vždy vnován

veliký prostor popisu slinutosti mužů, jejich krásných nohou, vlasů, držení těla a popis krásných žen je daleko střídmější. Další postava – Benedetta – samostatná žena na svou dobu snad až příliš, obklopená muži, úspěchem a netrpící nedostatkem peněz, se zase nějak záhadně, do Harryho zamiluje tak, že odvrhne celý svůj dosavadní způsob života a nabídne mu svoji lásku. A to ho jen slyšela pod okny zpívat. Příběh je vlastně stavěn na náhodách, které jsou jisté v životě – často dost významné, ale tady se mi jich zdálo trochu moc.
